



Anthropology of communication: Towards research in the humanities and social sciences

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to demonstrate the extent to which, for researchers in the humanities and social sciences, the use of the anthropology of communication can enable them to conduct meticulous research. This is achievable thanks to the methodological approach of this discipline, which requires the researcher to immerse themselves in and conduct fieldwork at

the site of investigation. This meticulous approach, known as the 'ethnographic approach', involves stages that are essential for achieving a relevant result, worthy of thorough and thoughtful research in the humanities and social sciences.

Keywords: Ethnographic approach – observation – field notes.

Introduction

The anthropology of communication is increasingly sought after by twenty-first-century researchers in the humanities and social sciences, as it focuses on the diversity of relationships between language, culture and society. It employs ethnographic research methods to study human behaviour, linguistic exchanges and, more generally, communicative practices.

In other words, the aim of the anthropology of communication is to understand the meaning of communicative activities at the various levels at which they can be interpreted: by the social actors themselves, on the one hand, and by the researchers observing them, on the other. It is in this sense that Yves Winkin (2005) states that the anthropology of communication succumbs to the illusion that society is made up of interactions and that it is sufficient to observe a few of them closely to grasp social reality, thanks to the application of an ethnographic approach.

The anthropology of communication developed by Yves Winkin views communication as an expression of culture, as it can be observed in the myriad interactions of everyday life. This approach favours a renewed ethnographic methodology, emphasising reflective observation. (Yves W: 2005)

This article presents a methodological model for all researchers in the humanities and social sciences, enabling them to achieve their assigned objectives whilst taking into account certain practical requirements, such as understanding gestures, signs and discourse in a clearly identified language, keeping a field notebook in which all observations made in the field are recorded, and many others.

It is divided into two parts: the first outlines the history of this methodological approach, whilst the second focuses on practical models of the anthropology of communication in the field of investigation. In other words, it highlights the appropriate use of the anthropology of communication as a relevant tool for all researchers in the humanities and social sciences.

Part One: Theoretical and Historical Foundations of the Anthropology of Communication

1.1. Origins and development of the anthropology of communication

The anthropology of communication emerged during the 1960s within the field of American cultural anthropology. In 1962, the anthropologist and linguist Delle Hymnes published a manifesto for an ethnography of speech. In it, he proposed

studying the relationship between language, culture and society in the tradition of the work of Franz Boas, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee, but with a greater emphasis on linguistic practices observed within their context.

The project of the anthropology of communication is defined in opposition to the linguistic approach to language phenomena. From Ferdinand de Saussure to Noam Chomsky, linguistics has sought to study language in and of itself, viewing it as a formal structure independent of its concrete uses.

In contrast, the anthropology of communication focuses on usage in order to better understand the role of language in social life.

Building on previous work, the study of the social uses of language requires the adoption of a resolutely ethnographic method of investigation, whereas linguistic anthropology had hitherto confined itself to the relationships of influence that exist between language, culture and thought. The anthropology of communication also differs from more strictly linguistic approaches in another respect. If, between 1962 and 1964, Gumperz and Dell spoke more of the 'ethnography of speech' than the 'ethnography of communication', it was to emphasise that the latter is not limited to the exchange of verbal messages. Non-verbal communication plays an important role in social life, even though it is undeniable that spoken language represents a privileged mode of communication within the human species. Verbal communication includes the exchange of linguistic messages, both written and spoken: the ethnography of writing practices is therefore an integral part of this approach to the anthropology of communication, as are sign languages for the deaf and hard of hearing, or the gestural language of the Plains Indians, which served as a lingua franca between several linguistic groups.

Communication relies on non-verbal signals; this primarily concerns the paralinguistic aspects of speech. This term refers to the vocal elements that accompany the linguistic message without, however, being reducible to it – for example, prosody (that is to say, the inflections specific to spoken language). However, intonation can carry social significance: a change in tone indicates how the speech is to be understood, for example by signalling to the listeners that the utterance is meant as a joke. Similarly, an accent is a powerful marker of origin or social status; finally, certain types of speech are distinguished by their prosody – for example, funeral laments expressed in a sung-spoken style.

In 1967, Dell Hymes used the term ‘anthropology of communication’ for the very first time. The programme proposed by Dell Hymes consisted of ethnographic research into behaviours, situations and objects that are perceived within a community as having communicative value. Referring to the definition offered by his colleague Ward Goodnough in 1957, Dell Hymes ultimately defined ‘‘ culture as follows: ‘the culture of a society consists of everything one needs to know or believe in order to behave in a manner acceptable to the members of that society, and it is in every role that it would assign to each of its’.” (Ngoie M: 2023).

In France, however, the field of anthropology has not enjoyed such widespread academic recognition, despite the pioneering work of G  n  ve Calame-Griaule, who pioneered French-style ethnolinguistics in the 1960s, and, even though a number of French-speaking anthropologists have made original contributions to this school of thought (Ngoie M: Ibid.).

Such a communicative approach emphasises the circular nature of communication and the more or less successful sharing not only of information but also of meanings. It is crucial to note that meaning is not the message itself, but is created jointly by the people interacting. It depends not only on what we say, but also on the way in which we interact. By interaction, we mean the reciprocal and simultaneous influence exerted by the people present on the mutual expectations they develop in relation to one another.

I.2. The anthropology of communication as a science within the field of communication

The links between anthropology and communication go back a long way. One might therefore wonder whether the two disciplines might not simply be inseparable. To practise anthropology within the field of communication is to position oneself at the crossroads of two disciplines, both of which have spent a great deal of time defining themselves and are both characterised by their eclecticism. In France, the links between communication studies – particularly within information science research – and anthropology were forged relatively late, in the 1980s and 1990s, at a time when anthropology was redefining itself around the concept of the contemporary, and research into cities and urban phenomena led to this convergence. In this respect, we can say that the anthropology of communication remains indispensable for all researchers adopting an **ethnographic** approach.

Part Two: practical models of the anthropology of communication

II.1. How to conduct ethnographic research into communication practices

One of the key concepts in the anthropology of communication is that of communicative competence. This contrasts with the notion of linguistic competence at the heart of formal approaches to language. It is not merely knowing how to speak correctly, but also the ability to determine when to speak, what to speak about, with whom and in what manner. Correspondingly, the anthropology of communication is not concerned with an abstract linguistic community, but with what is known as a language community. By this we mean any group of people who share not only the same language, but also the same ways of speaking, as well as a set of norms regarding language users. We shall therefore study, for example, the specific ways of speaking characteristic of a social group. Only fieldwork enables us to identify and describe a language community and to define its boundaries (Julien B: 2019).

In doing so, this requires adopting a principle of methodological relativism regarding the criteria for inclusion or exclusion from groups. If, within a society, certain animal species or the spirits of ancestors are regarded as legitimate interlocutors, then they must be counted amongst the members of that language community. In ritual contexts in particular, participants are led to lend a voice to an invisible or non-human entity, or to an artefact charged with embodying its presence (such as a mask, a statue or a musical instrument).

The anthropology of communication has developed a set of concepts and methods to define as precisely as possible the ways of speaking within a given language community. According to Hymes (1998), the most relevant unit of analysis is what he calls the ‘communication event’. By this he means any sequence of activity in which language — or, more broadly, communication — plays a constitutive rather than merely incidental role. This could be a religious prayer, a legal plea or an academic lecture.

It is important to note that the anthropology of communication does not focus solely on face-to-face verbal exchanges, but deals with all forms of communication, regardless of the nature of the messages and the channels through which they are conveyed; even silence constitutes a form of communication, since refraining from speaking is a meaningful situation for the participants. Those present regard their relationship as too ambiguous or uncertain to strike up a conversation. Silence thus serves as a relational index for the

participants. (Julien B: 2019). This indexical dimension of language represents one of the main subjects of study in the anthropology of communication.

According to Yves Winkin (1996), the aim of the anthropology of communication is to study the hum of the world. However, this is done in such a way as to avoid the soporific effects of theoretical constructs that would continue to draw on bookish compilations without any commitment to fieldwork. Yves Winkin possesses a remarkable pedagogical: nuanced and critical yet warm, rich in accounts of lived and analysed experiences, and also rich in a whole range of ethical questioning (Julien B: *ibid.*).

Whilst maintaining a general and critical perspective, Yves Winkin manages to examine elements or concepts which, in the work of these various thinkers and researchers, can be regarded as partially constituting an anthropology of communication: communication conceived here as the dynamic aspect of social interdependence (culture in action). This anthropology advocates a certain methodological approach that takes into account the observer-researcher as an actor situated simultaneously within the process of determining research positions and objects, within the process of observation, and within the process of theoretical construction.

Yves Winkin, as indicated by Gérard Dérèze in his article entitled '*On the Anthropology of Communication*', asserts that the anthropology of communication is based on a demeaning view of society, which is entirely in line with the thinking of the coiner of the term 'anthropology of communication' (Gérard D: 1988).

Indeed, within the research orientations in the social sciences — including the anthropology of communication — which do not treat subjects as 'cultural idiots' (to use the term from ethnomethodology), it is considered that taking into account the perspective of common sense and ordinary knowledge both describes and constitutes a state of affairs and worldviews. This common-sense knowledge is not the enemy of scientific knowledge, which, according to Durkheimian principles, could only be constructed by breaking with the former. On the contrary, and using terms with which, it seems to us, Yves Winkin would identify, scientific knowledge is coextensive with common-sense knowledge, with the indigenous view of society. Starting from this fundamental position, the author proposes a definition of scientific work as he conceives it within his anthropological framework. This definition attempts, in a certain sense, to establish a dynamic between autonomy and heteronomy without, however, proposing a convergence of the actors' discourses and the

researchers' analyses, as a sociological intervention would do, the aim of which is to strengthen the actors' capacities for analysis and reflection. (Yves W: 1999)

According to Gérard Dérèze (Gérard D: *ibid.*), scientific work on communication must be carried out on two levels, or in two stages. Initially, the aim is to use participant observation to highlight the frameworks of perception and organisation through which certain natural and social phenomena are regarded, within a given social group, as events or acts of communication. This description must, in a sort of way, reconstruct the 'ethnoscience of communication' of the group or community in question. When the researcher attempts to reveal the presuppositions underpinning this practical science and sets out to identify the links between them and a set of philosophical postulates, religious beliefs and myths about humankind and nature prevalent within that group, they move on to the second stage of their work: they then employ a scientific metalanguage, which has its own models and organisational principles (Gérard D: *ibid.*).

The consideration of observation is always situationally embedded, which requires the researcher to engage in necessary reflexive reflection in order to prevent scientific practice from remaining 'out of frame'. It holds that the observer is embedded in a situation (the field) and that they endeavour to see and think about this situation whilst being within it (the reverse shot).

The ethnographic approach that Yves Winkin also seeks to propose provides a foundation for the fieldwork he advocates and into which he boldly involves his students. By emphasising that 'ethnography is an education of the gaze but also of writing', he demonstrates, in a sense, the challenges and practical requirements associated with his definition of scientific work at the two levels mentioned previously. (Gérard D: *ibid.*).

Gérard Dérèze states that, through his book, Yves Winkin recalls – by means of a brief historical overview highlighting the significance of the work carried out in Chicago – how urban ethnography calls upon three qualities – essential skills for anyone wishing to get their hands dirty in the field: the art of seeing (observation) and the art of being (empathic relationships). By advising his postgraduate students to undertake observations in cafés, restaurants, railway stations, swimming pools, churches and parks, he requires them to work only in accessible public or semi-public spaces that are not particularly characterised by marginalisation or social isolation (unlike the approach taken in Chicago in the 1950s) and invites them to participate collectively in creating this

workshop atmosphere, which is the only one conducive to the transmission of ethnographic know-how. (Gérard D: *ibid.*)

Taking Yves Winkin's viewpoint into account, Gérard Derège, in his dissertation, argues that the anthropology of communication — which focuses on **the here and now** — seeks to describe the lives or segments of life (practices, interactions, representations) of people he might encounter outside his usual field of observation by sitting in a public park, attending a major football match, going to a concert or visiting an exhibition. (Gérard D: 2019).

The researcher, whilst ethnographically studying the principles of communication, must take into account other key elements such as:

- **Communication in anthropology:**

Anthropology offers a particular way of examining, scrutinising and, essentially, seeing. But with reference to ethnomethodology, it would be more accurate to say 'seeing and reporting'. It is observable and reportable. It uses terms such as 'accountable, accounting, account' to convey the idea that, for a member of any ordinary organisation, a set of localised practices — that is, those situated within a specific framework — is available. This poses a serious challenge to the anthropologist's work whilst simultaneously defining a new aspect of their role. When examining social practices — and those of communication in particular — the researcher quickly realises that they cannot validly adopt the position of ethnology, and that they are both an observer and an actor (participant observation) integrated into the reality they are studying. But they also realise, sooner or later, that knowledge can take forms other than those of scientific discourse.

The researcher who has opted for an anthropological approach to communication becomes, in this context, a spokesperson. They step back whilst remaining indispensable. The text does not belong to them, and yet the work is their own creation. They are the narrator, and through this narrative form they avoid becoming bogged down in the dead ends of scientism whilst steering clear of the pitfalls of the literary essayist. It is therefore a matter, quite simply, of reconciling knowledge and communication, without any confusion of roles but, to paraphrase Edgar Morin, by refusing to accept that functional specialisation must come at the price of absurd fragmentation and that knowledge continues to disintegrate into a diversity of fields of knowledge. (Jean L: *ibid.*).

- **The concept of speech in communication:**

Indeed, the anthropology of communication also requires closer linguistic approaches on another point. If, between 1962 and 1964, Hymens shifted from the ethnography of speech to the ethnography of communication, it was to justify the fact that the latter does not stop at the exchange of verbal messages. Non-verbal communication remains indispensable in social life, although there is no doubt that spoken language represents a privileged mode of communication within the human community. Verbal communication involves the exchange of linguistic messages. However, it should be noted that a verbal message can also be conveyed via a tactile channel — such as, for example, Braille — as well as through visual and gestural channels, such as sign languages for the deaf and hard of hearing, or the gestural language of the Plains Indians, which served as a *lingua franca* between several linguistic groups. (Julien B: 2019).

- **The concept of participant observation versus systematic observation:**

A good researcher working in the field of the anthropology of communication must recognise that it is a comprehensive social science: an anthropologist does not have a restricted field of study; they cannot, for example, claim to be a specialist in rituals alone. Participant observation involves the researcher's participation in the field of study in order to observe the situation more effectively. Following participant observation — which is an ongoing process — comes systematic observation. Once you have spent a considerable amount of time studying the work in the field, you begin to gather 'objective' qualitative data. You must then collate this various data that has been collected. There are therefore two fundamental stages: the first involves observation, during which you participate in social life whilst observing others. The second stage involves systematic surveys of the local population or that of the urban area, resulting in a synthesis. However, people must be willing to help you. (Jean-L: 2015).

- **Reporting on fieldwork**

In fact, in the anthropology of communication, when reporting on fieldwork, there are certain points that the researcher needs to be aware of, namely:

- Field notes: In a remarkable work entitled **Field Notes**, R. Sanjek and his colleagues provide an in-depth look at the processes involved in the production of anthropology. They explore how to write about anthropology and also shed light on the relationship between ethnologists and their archives

and writings (Sanjeck: 1990). There is a wide variety of attitudes on this subject: according to some, interviews or recorded texts (oral traditions) do not constitute notes, nor do the various types of diaries or field surveys. For others, the notes themselves constitute the data, whilst still others believe that it is the ethnologists' opinions and reactions that constitute the notes. Field notes serve not only as a record of observations but also as an outlet for expressing feelings towards informants. They act both as a reminder of one's state of mind at the time and as documents that will subsequently function as a database. However, practices in this regard are also highly diverse. Some anthropologists believe that note-taking slows down the research during the observation phases, as it demands considerable attention; others, on the contrary, suggest that it is a step towards cooling one's thoughts and temporarily organising one's ideas. (Jean L: 2019).

- **Fieldwork (observing and participating)**

The anthropology of communication relies heavily on participant observation to study the phenomenon effectively. Participant observation: this is the established term used to describe an ethnologist's approach in the field. Indeed, the ethnologist does not merely listen, ask questions or watch. In many cases, they base their understanding of a system, a practice or an event on the narrative of that system.

Observation is not self-evident. How, indeed, can one observe and participate at the same time? Does observing a practice not imply a certain distance, whilst participation – whilst offering first-hand knowledge of an action or situation – does it not limit one's ability to grasp it in its entirety? Therefore, ethnologists distinguish – to describe this dual approach to gaining an intimate understanding of a social situation – between participant observation (where observation takes precedence and is carried out at close quarters and with active involvement) and observing participation (where participation takes precedence, but includes moments when action is suspended to observe one's own actions and those of others). (Jean L: Ibid.)

- **Fieldwork: arriving, listening and talking**

When conducting fieldwork, it should be noted that the extended duration of the stay contributes to the establishment of a routine of interaction that will come to be seen as normal, and helps to make the ethnologist's presence seem a little less exceptional or a little less out of the ordinary, even though their profile remains unclear and their requests may be

surprising. But the real difficulty for an ethnologist to consider has, for some time now, been the negotiation of their 'otherness' – that is, understanding how one is perceived and with whom or what one is associated: a journalist? A tourist? Are they a representative (but of what)? These are all figures of otherness that have become widespread and which, for most societies, are the principal instruments of 'contact' or globalisation. The ethnologist is indeed part of this group, even though their role and function are increasingly understood as the added value of the discipline in highlighting the unique cultural characteristics of a society.

- **Fieldwork in the text**

Indeed, the place of fieldwork in the academic text – the way in which the researcher recounts their field experience in their narrative or analyses – deserves particular attention. Notes jotted down on the spot or reflections at the end of the day become information for provisional analyses, experiences lived in the field and, in a sense, a reconstruction of the fieldwork which undoubtedly gains, in retrospect, a coherence and unity that it probably did not initially possess. (Jean C; Nicolas A: 2019);

- **The concept of culture as communication**

The anthropology of communication also takes culture into account. The first definition of culture as communication is a classic one.

That is to say, it identifies communication as the set of specific and explicit modes of transmitting information. Within this set of specific and explicit modes of information transmission, in everyday life, we refer to communication as a phenomenon involving the sending and receiving of speech, letters, signals, images, etc. Specialised research into communication largely falls within this framework: media sociology, the psychology of interactions, media foresight, the psychology of interactions and foresight on new technologies continually employ – both in their theoretical work on model-building and in their analyses – a telegraphic definition of communication, namely: a sender A sends a message X to a receiver B via medium Z. The terms may vary, but the basic framework remains the same. (Yves W, Jean François D: 2016).

To expand this framework is, in one way or another, to opt for a more challenging approach, both because it challenges conventional wisdom and because research has never embarked on this path. The aim is to conceive of communication not as a specific and limited phenomenon, but rather as a concept that integrates and enables us to think differently about the links between the individual and society,

as well as between society and culture. (Yves W, Jean-François D: IDEM).

- **The notion of the ‘spaces’ of anthropological communication: Context as a social field**

The anthropological perspective now shapes communication research, from philosophers of everyday language to pragmatists, linguists and psychologists. In their work, many researchers have taken a holistic look at what might be called ‘micro-universes’: a hospital, a prison, a school, and so on. This stems, at least in part, from a current general trend that seeks to prioritise the ordinary, the mundane, the everyday, and the concrete nature of interactions and speaking subjects. However, it can also be seen as a clear rejection of ideal and abstract concepts, without for all that abandoning theory; here, there is a refusal to dismiss the usefulness of theoretical reasoning.

The way in which anthropologists conduct their analyses, however, remains distinctive. One of their favoured methods, sometimes referred to as the ‘natural history’ method, is based on the systematic observation of data collected in an unobtrusive manner, in a natural setting. This is a classic approach in ethnology, with the difference that here it focuses more on contexts – perhaps a semiotic environment; but for the anthropologist, it is above all the ‘situation’ that matters, a term denoting the setting and circumstances in which an interaction takes place. This is a very broad concept, whereby every field study is quickly led to make further distinctions such as the physical setting, the scenario, the institutional context and rituals. What we can take away from the concept of ‘places’ in anthropological communication is that places are to space rather than moments are to time. They are, first and foremost, geographical landmarks within the physical space of the actual situational data. We perceive them through our senses. But when inhabited by humans, places immediately become symbolic spaces. It is here that the representation of objects takes shape, but also—and above all—the representation of the other is realised through encounter, exchange, sharing, negotiation, occupation, use, appropriation, reclaiming, exclusion and confrontation. Symbolic space is also the space of social relations where society itself is organised, with its conventions, structures, powers, rituals, collective representations and culture. The geographical place, structured by the relational dynamics that organise social and institutional life, is therefore, above all, the symbolic place where communication takes place. **The physical place thus becomes a place of communication as a space structured by relationships between individual and collective subjects.**

What, then, of communication in anthropology?

Anthropology offers a particular way of examining, scrutinising and, essentially, seeing. But drawing on ethnomethodology, it would be more accurate to speak of writing, seeing and reporting. It is observable, reportable. It uses terms such as ‘accountable, accounting, account’ to convey the idea that, for a member of any ordinary organisation, a set of localised practices — that is, those situated within a specific framework — is available.

This poses a serious problem for the researcher’s work whilst at the same time defining a new aspect of it. By examining social practices—and those of communication in particular—the researcher quickly realises that they cannot validly adopt the position of ethnology and that they are both an observer and an actor (participant observation) integrated into the reality they are studying. But they also realise, sooner or later, that the ‘’ knowledge can take forms other than those of scientific discourse. The researcher who has opted for an anthropological approach to communication thus becomes a spokesperson and rapporteur (Jean L: *ibid.*).

Conclusion

The anthropology of communication offers us a highly relevant methodological approach, one that is indispensable for social science researchers in particular. Through mastery of this methodological approach, known as the ‘ethnographic approach’, social science researchers will be able to carry out a meticulous and well-considered study.

Several authors, such as Yves Wilkin, Jean Copains, Jean Loïc and many others, have outlined the scope and relevance of this methodological approach to encourage researchers to make use of it.

The anthropology of communication remains a tool that prioritises thoughtful research in the field, taking into account the linguistic, social and cultural aspects of the community or communities under investigation, with a view to providing insightful findings.

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